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Prevention of Pet Wild Cat Mortality: Conservation Aspects

by Michael W. Petersen* Ph.D.

Introduction

The worldwide decline of many wild cat populations is becoming increasingly evident. This decline may be attributed to several factors: (1) the fur trade; (2) the pet trade; (3) habitat destruction; (4) predator control programs; and (5) trophy hunting activities. Legislation in the form of the Endangered Species Conservation Act⁸ has moved to counteract such population decreases through partial restriction of wild felid importation.

This paper will discuss: (1) some effects of the pet industry upon wild cats; (2) some suggestions for reduction or elimination of pet wild cat mortality; and (3) the role which veterinarians might assume in reduction of mortality factors associated with pet wild cats.

Effects of the Pet Industry

North American wild cats most commonly owned as pets include the ocelot (*Felis pardalis*), margay (*F. wiedii*), jaguarundi (*F. yagouaroundi*), puma (*F. concolor*) and bobcat (*Lynx rurus*). Other species (from various parts of the world) which occur on the pet market include the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), tiger, (*P. tigris*), lion (*P. leo*), leopard (*P. pardus*), chee-

tah (*Acinonyx* spp.), and many smaller species of *Felis*. Ocelots and margays, because of their tractability, small body size and beauty, appear to be the most popular pet wild cats. Most of this discussion will emphasize these two species; however, much will apply to the other species of wild cats as well.

Currently, the U. S. Department of Interior considers only certain subspecies of wild cats to be rare or endangered. Thus, only certain populations, but not entire species are protected by the Act (see reference 7, p. MP-29 for detailed lists of rare and endangered North American wild cats; the I.U.C.N. Red Data Book contains an international list of endangered wild cats). Consequently many wild *felids* are subject to several types of exploitation, including the pet industry. Because of this inevitable pet trade, it is the duty of professional conservationists, zoologists, wildlife biologists, veterinarians and others having contact with these animals to ensure a reduction or elimination of mortality factors associated with captivity. It is presently estimated that 75 to 90 percent of the ocelots and margays trapped for the pet trade will never survive the trip to the prospective exotic cat owner. If we now add the mortality which occurs after an exotic cat is purchased, it becomes evident that most of these cats have very little chance for survival.

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Mortality may occur at any stage of the importation trip. These stages include trapping, holding compound, animal exporter, animal importer, distributor, pet store owner and eventual cat owner. Death or disease may result from improper diet (generally raw meat only), small cages, unsanitary conditions, poor handling techniques, trauma associated with the importation trip, failure to immediately administer adequate vaccinations (particularly for feline enteritis) and failure to administer a complete physical examination upon arrival (endoparasites often go undetected until too late).

Suggestions for Reduction of Mortality Factors

Some people have suggested that breeding these wild cats in captivity would be the only answer for perpetuating the endangered animals. This idea is partially correct, however, it is not the sole remedy to the problem. Erickson² described a federal research program for endangered species. He correctly stated that captive breeding programs cannot be "a substitute for the study, preservation or management of natural ecosystems. . . ." Rather, captive breeding should be used as only one of several means to continue the species.

Several zoos and private citizens have had limited success with breeding exotic felines in captivity. These people have found that simulation of the natural habitat, extreme "privacy", or artificial insemination may increase chances of successful propagation in captivity. Others have discovered that although some cats would successfully mate and give birth without difficulty, the females would often kill or abandon the young. This has necessitated hand-raising the new litters with special formulas, etc.

Because of the limited success these people have had with breeding of captive wild cats, I have proposed elsewhere (see reference 4, for further details) the establishment of approximately 10 regional wild feline breeding centers throughout the United States. Each center would be supervised by competent zoologists, veterinarians, wildlife biologists, conservation-

ists or other qualified people. These breeding centers would serve to partially supply the demand for pet wild cats and to provide stock for re-populating depleted natural areas.

Another potentially effective measure for curtailing pet wild cat mortality would be through rigid control of the pet industry (by federal and state governments aided by private citizens). This control would be extended through all stages of cat importation (from trapping through eventual pet cat ownership). All people at each stage of the trip could be listed, contacted and educated with respect to reduction of the mortality factors listed earlier in the discussion. Cisin¹, Jackson³ and Zimmerman⁹ have dealt quite thoroughly with proper nutrition, handling techniques and veterinary care (necessary vaccinations, etc.). These items could be enforced by the proper authorities.

Most people who purchase wild cats for pets are uninformed of the tremendous responsibility which is incurred if proper care is to be given. The cats are frequently purchased as curiosity items, as status symbols, or for their beauty alone. These cats usually die or are given up, often to poorer conditions, once the person realizes what he is actually sharing his home with.

Methods for increasing survival rates in pet wild cats are given in detail elsewhere⁷. Briefly, they include:

- (1) Application to "approved" sources for wild cats—regional breeding centers (if implemented), pet stores and private owners who have domestic-bred offspring for sale.
- (2) Examination and evaluation of prospective owners' attitudes toward and knowledge of exotic cat ownership.
- (3) Arrangement for visits by prospective owners to homes of successful owners.
- (4) Courses of instruction for proper care techniques.
- (5) Increasing commercial prices for these cats.
- (6) Inspections to ensure that proper care is being given.

The use of such guidelines would probably discourage most people from prospec-

tive ownership. Cats living in households of selected qualified owners would have a greatly increased chance for survival in captivity. The qualified prospective owners would have a *limited* supply of cats to choose from each year. This could be accomplished by order of receipt of application, or by random selection if there were more applicants than cats. Administration of such tasks by proper authorities would be necessary on a regional basis. In summary, a small supply of wild cats would be available for research purposes (ie., for studies on reproductive physiology or behavior), and for those people who truly enjoy close contact and an intangible relationship with such animals.

Suggested Role of the Veterinarian

The veterinarian can assume an extremely important role in the conservation of wild felids. Probably his first task would be to acquire knowledge on care and behavior of exotic cats. Information on technical aspects for care of these cats can be obtained from several sources: (1) through discussions with other veterinarians and successful owners experienced in this area; (2) by referring to Zimmerman's⁹ article on small exotic cats—this article gives technical information on vaccination procedures (ie., use of killed vs. live enteritis vaccine), care and feeding, common surgical procedures and common medical problems; (3) by referring to Cisin's¹ and Jackson's³ books for general care techniques and responsibilities; and (4) by obtaining a list of veterinarians who have had experience in the treatment and/or care of exotic cats. This list is available from an exotic cat club (Long Island Ocelot Club—Amagansett, N.Y. 11930). L.I.O.C. also publishes a bi-monthly newsletter which among many articles, contains information on specific problems and solutions (ie., see reference⁶) connected with the care of these cats.

All veterinarians might then ask themselves three questions: (1) Am I prepared to treat an exotic cat if someone brings one to my office? (2) Am I technically knowledgeable on the veterinary care of these animals? and (3) Do I feel the same

sense of responsibility to treat a wild animal as I do to treat a domestic animal?

His second task would be to discourage people from buying and owning such animals as pets. Prospective owners can often be discouraged if they are informed of the tremendous responsibilities required for this type of ownership. Many of these responsibilities are discussed by Cisin¹ and Jackson³. People who are insistent on owning such a cat should be encouraged to obtain and thoroughly read and re-read Cisin's and Jackson's books. These people should also be encouraged to visit homes of successful owners, and engage in comprehensive discussions on the pros and cons of exotic cat ownership.

Many pet store owners also lack knowledge of proper care techniques for wild cats. Qualified persons could maintain "surveillance" of such stores, or even more effectively, ask the proprietor if he has plans for selling exotic cats. A few simple questions would reveal his level of knowledge on proper care techniques. If he was uninformed, the qualified person could direct him to proper sources of knowledge.

When most any animal, domestic or wild, is brought into strange surroundings (ie., examination room), it will naturally be timid. This is particularly noticeable among the wild cats. Many become next to impossible to handle at this time. Often, special handling equipment and/or tranquilizing drugs become necessary. It is particularly important to realize that these drugs may have a more profound effect on wild animals than on domestic animals.

If use of drugs is not necessary, it often pays to attempt to "make friends" with the cat before any treatment is undertaken. It is usually advisable that the owner be present. The wild cat will never allow a strange person to "force" himself upon it. Patience is extremely important. In extreme cases, the cat will never allow anyone but its owner to handle it—even for routine enteritis booster shots. In these instances, it is perhaps better that the veterinarian give the necessary materials (along with proper instructions) to the owner, such that the latter may administer these shots in the privacy of the home environment.

Pet wild cat owners often wish to have their animals de-clawed, de-fanged or neutered. The veterinarian should discourage these practices for reasons of safety (anesthetic risks, aesthetic aspects, general health of the animal (proper exercise) and added reproductive potential.

People often desire to board their pet wild cats at a veterinarian's establishment while taking an extended trip. This practice should be discouraged. Although certain individual cats may adjust to these temporary quarters, many will not. Some are "one-owner" cats. The psychological trauma of being separated from their owner has often resulted in death. The alternatives are: (1) leave the animal in a home with another person *experienced* with its care—this person should be accepted by the cat *prior* to the trip; or (2) allow the cat to accompany the owner on the trip—this is possible if the animal travels well, but it requires considerable preparation. The latter alternative is perhaps the more desirable of the two, because the owner is accustomed to the cat's individual peculiarities.

In summary, this paper has discussed some influences of the pet industry upon wild cats; it has given suggestions for reducing pet wild cat mortality; and it has proposed some possible roles the veterinarian can assume in conserving a very important part of the world's fauna.

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Armadillo Research Role Strengthened

An important second step has been made by two Louisiana scientists to establish a role for armadillos in medical research, and more specifically in the study of leprosy.

Development of leprosy in a second armadillo took place approximately four months after the first announcement that these creatures might be useful in biomedical research.

As reported in the October 1971 *NSMR Bulletin*, Dr. Eleanor E. Storrs, director of biochemistry of Gulf South Research Institute in New Iberia and Dr. Waldemar F. Kirchheimer of the U.S. Public Health

Hospital at Carville are seeking to develop this animal as a laboratory model.

When they first announced their work, the researchers had only one animal which was positively identified as having Lepromatous Leprosy. That one died leaving Drs. Storrs and Kirchheimer to wait for further development of the disease in the other animals inoculated with leprosy bacterium.

The scientists say development of leprosy in a second armadillo assures that the initially infected animal was not a genetic fluke. (*NSMR Bulletin* Feb. 1972)